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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether gender differences in proscribed language behavior, attitudes, and beliefs would emerge from an anonymous self-report questionnaire. A total of 87 men and 87 women enrolled in 6 sections of a required sophomore course at a regional southeastern university voluntarily completed the questionnaire which was designed to check "taboo" language attitudes, beliefs, and usage in various situations. Results indicated that (1) a two-thirds majority of men and women believed that a double standard exists which assumes that taboo language is for the use of men, and that women who use taboo language are criticized for being unladylike; (2) although a majority of men and women believed that taboo language should be equally appropriate for women to use as it is for men, the majority also believed that college women were less prone to use taboo language than college men; (3) the majority of respondents believed that swearing was a matter of morals, not just a matter of etiquette; (4) almost all subjects reported the use of taboo language with some degree of regularity; (5) male respondents rated themselves as more frequent users of taboo language than female respondents rated themselves; (6) male respondents also reported the use of taboo language in more public places than did female respondents; and (7) 55% of female respondents, compared to 24% of male respondents, reported venting emotion as their only reason for using taboo language. Findings suggest that traditional attitudes are still firmly entrenched in the fabric of southeastern subjects' lives. (RS)

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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PROSCRIBED LANGUAGE BEHAVIOR, BELIEFS, AND ATTITUDES

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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF
GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PROSCRIBED LANGUAGE
BEHAVIOR, BELIEFS, AND ATTITUDES

In her book of etiquette published in America in 1913, Parsons contends that taboo language belongs to men. She states, "To-day no gentleman will 'insult' another - at least not very openly - before a lady. He cannot even swear at another man - or in fact at anything - with a woman around" (129-130).

Flexner, in his preface to the Dictionary of American Slang published in 1960, also indicates gender differences in the use of taboo language. He states that "most American slang is created and used by males" (xii). In 1985, Cameron states that in some communities, people will agree that certain language practices like swearing are more acceptable for men than for women (31).

Does society in the 1990s still condemn women's use of proscribed language more harshly than it does men's? Or are the winds of change bringing fresh, new attitudes towards taboo language use by women? In 1973, Farb noted the winds of change when he stated, "nowadays young women use words that were formerly taboo for them with as much freedom as young men use them" (55-56). Likewise, Trudgill in 1983 maintained that "the use of taboo vocabulary is now much more evenly distributed between the sexes than formerly" (163).

Trudgill's statement might suggest a change in the once

widely held view that taboo language is more acceptable for men than it is for women. To address this notion and the notion of a greater parity of taboo language use by males and females in the nineties, I conducted a bit of survey research during the spring and summer of 1993. The purpose of this research was to see if gender differences in proscribed language behavior, attitudes, and beliefs would emerge from an anonymous self-report questionnaire filled out by Caucasian undergraduates enrolled at a regional university in the Southeast.

Participation in the study was voluntary within a regular classroom setting. Subjects were enrolled in six sections of the required sophomore course entitled "Literature of the Western World." Approximately twenty per cent of the sophomore class, a total of 174 subjects, 87 women and 87 men, completed the questionnaire which was designed to check taboo language attitudes, beliefs, and usage in various situations. The women subjects ranged from 18-34 years of age. The men subjects ranged from 18-37 years of age. Average age was 20.1 for women and 22.2 for men.

The results of this study suggest a difference in cultural codes regulating men and women's use of taboo language in the Southeast. A two-thirds majority of both men and women subjects reported the belief that there exists a double standard for taboo language use which assumes that taboo language is for the use of men. Similarly, a majority of both men and women subjects reported a belief that college

women who use taboo language are criticized for being unladylike.

Although a majority of both men and women subjects believe that taboo language should be equally appropriate for women to use as it is for men, the majority of both men and women subjects believe that college women are less prone to use taboo language than are college men. Is this because women lack the vocabulary for taboo talk? Not according to the survey. The survey revealed that a majority of both men and women subjects believe that women have a taboo language vocabulary equal to that of men.

In checking attitudes towards prestige to be derived from taboo language use, I found that approximately one-third of the men and one-third of the women subjects believe that some prestige is attached to the use of taboo language by college men in certain contexts, whereas only approximately one-sixth of the men and one-sixth of the women subjects believe that some prestige is attached to the use of taboo language by college women in certain contexts.

Another finding of this study reveals that although the majority of men subjects do not judge college women who use taboo language as assertive, the majority of women subjects do view women who use taboo language as assertive. However, college men who use taboo language are not judged assertive by a majority of men or women subjects.

Before I report subjects' beliefs concerning how taboo

language use intersects religious beliefs, let me reiterate that this survey research was conducted in the Southeast, in the Bible Belt, where social life revolves around the church. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that the majority of both men and women subjects reported the belief that swearing is a matter of morals, not just a matter of etiquette. In addition, approximately nine-tenths of both men and women subjects reported a belief that taking the name of God in vain is offensive to God. Furthermore, a majority of both men and women subjects reported a belief that use of taboo language in our society is a result of indifference toward religion.

Next, let us leave attitudes and beliefs and examine the self-report findings on usage. Although subjects indicated that they fit their taboo language usage to the situation, almost all subjects reported the use of taboo language with some degree of regularity. Whereas approximately fifty per cent of women subjects reported using taboo language very rarely, only twenty per cent of men subjects reported using taboo language very rarely. On the other hand, whereas eight per cent of women subjects reported using taboo language frequently, twenty-three per cent of men subjects reported frequent use if it. Clearly, men subjects rate themselves as more frequent users of taboo language than women subjects rate themselves.

Moreover, gender differences were reported in where subjects generally use taboo language, with men subjects

indicating the use of taboo language in more public places than women subjects. Although many men and women subjects reported a solitary use a taboo language, thirteen per cent of women subjects indicated they use taboo language only when they are alone, while only five per cent of men subjects reported only solitary use of taboo language. A majority of both men an women subjects reported less tendency to use taboo language in the presence of parents, children, and strangers than with peers. Similarly, a majority of both men and women subjects reported that they use taboo language more freely with friends of the same sex than with friends of the opposite sex.

Subjects also reported gender differences in taboo language choice. In response to the question which instructed subjects to list the taboo terms they use most frequently, men subjects reported a tendency to prefer taboo language which refers to sex, while women subjects reported a tendency to prefer taboo language which refers to hell and damnation. In addition, women subjects reported significantly less preference for excretory terms than did men subjects. The majority of both men and women subjects reported that the taboo term they consider to be the strongest and most powerful is the F-word and the taboo term they consider to be the weakest and least powerful is "hell." The weak term "hell," by the way, is the term women subjects reported greatest preference for using.

The majority of both men and women subjects reported

using denigrating terms to refer to members of the opposite sex. Women subjects produced a total of 26 denigrating terms for men, while men subjects produced a total of 20 denigrating terms for women. The denigrating term listed most frequently by women subjects was "bastard;" the denigrating term listed most frequently by men subjects was "bitch." Whereas approximately one-half of men subjects reported using derogatory terms to refer to members of the same sex, approximately one-fourth of women subjects reported using derogatory terms to refer to members of the same sex.

Furthermore, this investigation revealed gender differences in reasons for using taboo language. Although all except one of the subjects reported using taboo language for the purpose of venting emotion, fifty-five per cent of women subjects, as compared to twenty-four percent of the men subjects, reported venting emotion as their only reason for using taboo language. In addition, more men than women subjects reported using taboo language for getting attention, establishing social power, bonding with friends, achieving strength of expression, insulting people, defying authority, emphasizing a point, shocking people, and signifying friendship. Also, more men than women subjects indicated a tendency to use taboo language in a creative, playful way.

In conclusion, this bit of survey research into the cultural phenomenon of taboo language reveals traditional attitudes still firmly entrenched in the fabric of the Southeastern subjects' lives. Evidence of the winds of

change is not very apparent. Not only do a two-thirds majority of both men and women subjects believe that there exists a double standard for taboo language use which assumes that taboo language use is more appropriate for men than women, but also a majority of both men and women subjects believe that college women who use taboo language are criticized for being unladylike. Perhaps these two beliefs have a bearing on the usage findings of this study. This research takes a contextual approach and reveals gender differences in what taboo language is used, why it is used, how it is used, with whom it is used, where it is used, as well as frequency with which it is used.

This study has been limited to setting forth the findings of taboo language behavior, beliefs, and attitudes on the basis of sex. Many aspects of the study remain for further treatment. For example, this study does not include an analysis of data as related to subjects' strength of religious belief, socio-economic status, section of the country, or whether subjects were reared in city, town, or rural area, although the data has been gathered for such analysis. Perhaps studying other variables associated with taboo language use will shed further light on those factors influencing taboo language behavior, attitudes, and beliefs.

In closing, a word of caution may be in order. Previous research I conducted with Caucausian undergraduate college women in 1991 did take into consideration the variable of section of the country and revealed that Southeastern women

subjects were significantly more inhibited in their use of taboo language than Northeastern women subjects. Since regional factors may be of considerable importance in influencing young college women's proscribed language behavior, attitudes, and beliefs, there is danger in generalizing the findings of this study.

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